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ABSTRACT

Despite exclusion from the mainstream of society in the late 1800s and the early part of this century, Chinese American youth in the Los Angeles (California) area adopted the sports of this country. Chinese American baseball and basketball teams competed with each other and with teams from the Japanese American community. Football was also played by Los Angeles Chinese Americans, and their games drew considerable local interest. Girls and women also played basketball as well as tennis. However, indigenous Chinese games and sports remain popular in their communities. The area's elementary school and children's center has attempted to retain authentic Chinese dances and past-times such as Chinese jump rope, lion dancers, and kite flying. This paper presents a history of the role of sport in the cultural and social development of Chinese Americans in the Los Angeles area. (JD)

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GAMES AND SPORT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA'S CHINESE-AMERICANS

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by

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Firecrackers. Ping-pong diplomacy. Tai chi chu'an. Chop suey. Bruce Lee. Kung fu. Dragons. Martial arts. Are these the things which come to mind when you think of the Chinese? This paper deals with the sports and games of southern California's Chinese-Americans and because of previous emphasis on the martial arts and table tennis, they will be mentioned only in passing and the paper will deal with lesser known activities.

Chinese migration to America began with the discovery of gold and while thousands came to California, very few came to the southern portion of the state. Railroad construction also brought thousands more in the 1860's but no Chinese community existed in the Los Angeles area until the late 1860's. In 1870, 172 Chinese lived in Los Angeles, primarily in the area surrounding the Plaza, near what is now Olvera Street. By the early 1890's approximately 2,000 Chinese made their home in Los Angeles and increased slowly so that by 1930, there were 3,000 Chinese inhabitants. Nearly half of the 3,000 lived in the vicinity of Alameda, Apablasa, and Los Angeles Streets, the area which Union Station now occupies.[1]

Many of Los Angeles' early Chinese were involved in growing and peddling fresh produce but as large-scale farming lowered prices, they moved into the wholesale produce business. Government Exclusion Acts prohibited

Chinese immigration and prejudice against hiring Chinese forced many to remove themselves from the competitive labor market and work in Chinese-owned businesses such as laundries and restaurants. Life for Los Angeles Chinese was difficult not only economically but also from the standpoint of prejudice. Housing restrictions existed as did laws banning Chinese from public swimming pools, beaches, the YMCA, and theaters. Obviously, "the Chinese were excluded from the mainstream of Los Angeles society."[2]

Despite this exclusion, when a group of merchants decided to hold a fiesta to stimulate tourist trade and thereby business, the Chinese were asked to participate and became the talk of the 1894 Fiesta de Los Angeles. Approximately 125 costumed Chinese participated, depicting an event in China's history and The Evening Express said "the Chinese were perhaps the most magnificent feature of the parade."[3] In the 1896 Fiesta, the Chinese entered a 200-foot-long dragon manipulated by fifty men and The Express called it "the crowning feature of the parade . . . ."[4]

Their appearances in the Fiesta parade notwithstanding, "the first concern was to work harder and save money; fun and play activities . . . were not an important phase of life for the first-generation Chinese."[5] Hard work and attempting to survive marked the turn of the century and well into the 1920's. Not only did adults work long days, children as well had little time for play. When public

school ended at 3 or 3:30, most youngsters in Chinatown then attended Chinese school from 4 to 6. Frequently after Chinese school there was work to finish in the laundries or businesses before going home to dinner and bed.

In 1924, some young men from Ninth and San Pedro with a little spare time on their hands, started a baseball team. According to the team's mascot Kenny Ung, the team was semi-pro because they passed the hat after games. Since there was no ball field or even playground in Chinatown, games usually were played at Echo Park. The team broke up shortly after its formation, sometime in 1926.[6]

Chinatown desperately needed a park and, in 1927 through the efforts of many, a vacant lot was converted into a ball field/playground called Apablasa Playground. The young men of the area raked the grounds, removed glass and rocks, and cleaned up the lot.[7] Many of these young men had their Sundays free and, whenever they had the time and money, would take the street car to Washington Park and later to Wrigley Field to see the Angels play.[8]

Victor Wong who was one of Belmont High School's star baseball players was asked to teach and coach a group of youngsters who wanted to form a team. This group named themselves the Chinese Owls but in 1929 when they began playing in the semi-pro leagues changed their name to the Los Angeles Chinese. Besides Wong, the team included Tommy Lee who had played for the 1924 team, pitcher Ray or Tango

Lue, and a superb athlete, George Tong. Each boy furnished his own uniform so no two were alike and the game stopped if the one ball was hit over the fence. Games were arranged by the players with teams from other playgrounds.[9]

Both Wong and Tong were the power hitters. A member of the team, James Chan remembered: "'The opposing teams figured we couldn't play so we stole bases on them and advanced. They would get excited and make errors, and we would win the game.'"[10] The only steady pitcher for the Owls was Tango Lue who pitched at least six innings of every game. According to Lue, he pitched sidearm, over and underhand and threw curves, sinkers and risers, all of which he learned to throw by reading a book. His strike-out record was 15 and consecutive strike-outs equalled 8 against a Japanese team.[11] In another game against a Japanese team the local Japanese paper reported that "Tango fanned two players and forced another batter to hit a weak one to shortstop . . . "[12] as the Owls beat the Japanese 21-16.

Football was also played by Los Angeles Chinese-Americans and while it was never on the scale of the Chinese-Japanese games held annually in San Francisco, it stirred up considerable local interest. In February, 1931, a game was arranged between an all-star Chinese team and the Oliver Club which had just won the championship of the Japanese football league. Responsible for arranging the

game was Joe Yuen, recently moved to Los Angeles and the field goal kicker who beat the San Francisco Japanese team, the Showa Shoguns, 3 to 0.

The game was to be played in conjunction with Chinese New Year celebrations and Rafu Shimpo, the Japanese newspaper called the Chinese team " . . . the great hopes of Chinatown, a husky team of footballers, the first ever to flaunt the colors of Cathay on the local gridiron." The paper continued: "opposing them will be the Oliver Club eleven, king-pins and prides of Los Angeles Little Tokyo, undefeated champions of the first Southland football league."[13] Several of the Chinese players, Kenny Ung, Walter Lee, and George Tong, were also members of the Los Angeles Chinese Baseball Team.

While the Japanese Olivers won the game 13-6, the sports editor of Rafu Shimpo said he would never forget "Joe Yeun driving the Jan-U-Wine chop suey truck." Nor would he forget "a couple of Japanese farmers holding a debate as to which was the Chinese team." In a comment with racial overtones, the editor thought he would always remember "Joe Yuen, the chop suey special, crashing the Oliver line."[14]

One of the most popular sports in Chinatown was basketball. In the early 1930's there were several Chinese-American teams but the two most prominent were the Southern California Chinese and the Lowa team (Lowa stood for Los

Angeles Chinese). The Lowa team was composed of several of the same young men who played baseball and football: James Chan, Victor Wong, Kenny Ung and the team's star player, George Tong. At 6'2", Tong stood above the rest of the team and was called "Long George Tong" or "Long Tong" by the Japanese papers. In an account of a game in which the Lowans beat the Japanese Hollycub team 21-15, Rafu Shimpo noted that the Chinese scored the first basket on the game's first play when Long Tong " . . . tipped the casaba to C. Ung who batted it to K. Ung for an easy set up."[15] This Lowa team of 1931 had an extremely successful year as they were undefeated and crowned champions of the Los Angeles Playground League.[16]

Tong and the Lowa team continued through the year and the team moved from the Playground League to AAU AA. Lowa won the AAU AA city championship and advanced to AAA where they were runners-up in 1939. The start of World War II caused the team to disband since many players went to war.

While he continued to play with the Lowans, George Tong also attended and graduated from the University of Southern California as a structural engineer. In 1940 he played with the Barker Brothers basketball team which won the Southern California AAU AAA championship and in 1945 was a member of the Clifton Cafeteria team. The Los Angeles Cliftons were in the top group of teams vying for the AAU

national championship. "In the American community, . . . Tong was hailed as the greatest Chinese basketball player ever developed in the southland . . . ."[17] Known also for designing the Los Angeles Sports Arena and CBS Television City, when Tong died in 1968 he was honored by the establishment of the George H. Tong Memorial award given annually to Chinatown's Alpine Playground individual who best exemplified Tong's qualities: achievement, sportsmanship, dedication, character, scholarship and teamwork. The motto which Tong lived by is inscribed on the permanent plaque: "every man can be a success! The greatest failure is not trying your hardest."[18]

Basketball was not just a sport for Chinatown's young men, girls and women also played. The Mei Wah Club, one of the Chinese community's oldest women's groups, was founded in 1931 for the purpose of playing basketball. Originally there were ten members who played twice a week. Coached by Lowa team member George Lee, the young women played semi-pro teams in basketball and baseball as well. The start of World War II stopped the basketball games but not the club which shifted emphasis to philanthropic endeavors. Three years ago the Mei Wahs celebrated their 50th anniversary and many of the charter members are still involved in the club's activities.[19]

Chinese-American women also played tennis and in the early 1930's the Los Angeles Chinese Tennis Club, a co-ed

group, was formed. Playing against tennis buffs from other city playgrounds, the Los Angeles Chinese Club won the Class B city championship in 1934. George Tong, also a fine tennis player, teamed with Ted Ung and won the city class A men's doubles title.[20] Club members also competed with the San Francisco Chinese Tennis Club on a home and home arrangement. Prominent club members included Tyrus and Ruth Wong, Milton Quon and Elsie Wong.

Many of the sports initiated in the 1930's have continued in the Chinese community to the present day. The Chinese Presbyterian and Chinese Baptist churches sponsored basketball teams in the 1950's and 1960's. In 1962 a Chinese basketball league was formed at Alpine Recreation Center, Chinatown's lone playground. This league grew until by 1977 over 30 teams were involved. Beginning in 1975 a Chinese all-star team has been selected each year and games have been arranged with visiting Taiwanese teams and the national champion team of South Korea. A league for players 35 and over was begun in 1978 and one team, the Old Horse team, has many 60 and over members. "If one wants to catch sight of a 68 years old with white beard flying streaking down court for a fast break, just drop by Alpine any Sunday between 11:30 and 1:30."[21]

While George Tong was a well known athlete among California Chinese, there have been other athletes too. Bob Chow, Tong's brother-in-law, was a member of the United States

Olympic shooting team in 1948. Ward Yee, a professional boxer in the late 1950's, fought many bouts at Los Angeles' Olympic auditorium. Perhaps the most famous southern California Chinese-American athlete is figure skater Tiffany Chin of whom Dr. Munson Kwok, president of the Chinese Historical Society of Southern California, said: "Tiffany has all Chinese-Americans united and rooting for her."[22]

The sports discussed to this point are western in nature. What of indigenous Chinese games and sports? Despite acculturation, vestiges of typical Chinese activities remain. The Chinese lions still dance and beg for lettuce and money during the Lunar New Year and the huge dragon moves sinuously in the New Year's parade in much the same fashion as he did in the 1896 Los Angeles Fiesta. Added attractions of the celebration include a day-long schedule of dance performances with many authentic Chinese dances, table tennis and basketball tournaments, and a 10 k. run. 1984 marked the 6th Annual Firecracker 10 k. Run, and unlike the earlier runs, many Chinese-Americans were entered.

Castelar, Chinatown's elementary school and children's center, has attempted to retain authentic Chinese dances and pastimes. The 1984 Chinese New Year's program included Chinese jump rope, lion dancers, and Chinese folk dances.

A typical Chinese pastime is kite flying and artist Tyrus Wong is perhaps the chief proponent. An expert at

kite making as well as flying, Wong uses his artistic talent in the creation of multi-unit kites. On a 1978 visit to his home village outside Guangdong, Wong remembered the kites he had seen as a child and on his return to Los Angeles was inspired to try his hand at kite making. His first attempt was a single swallow but soon he had advanced to creating " . . . a string of 25 white birds to be flown on sunny, clear days."[23] He has now created over 200 kites. One of his most beautiful is a 107-foot-long centipede composed of 51 varicolored segments with feathers attached for feet. The kite is striking as it appears to crawl across the sky.

While sport has not had the highest priority in the culture, the southern California Chinese-Americans have a rich heritage of sport participation. Active involvement should continue to increase and the retention of indigenous activities will, hopefully, become even more prevalent.

NOTES

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4. "La Fiesta de Los Angeles. The Parade," (Los Angeles) The Evening Express, April 22, 1896, p. 1.

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6. George and Elsie Yee, "The 1927 Chinese Baseball Team," Los Angeles Chinatown 1981 Souvenir Book, p. 9.

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8. Interview with Tango (Ray) Lue, Los Angeles, California, March 18, 1984.

9. Yee, p. 11.

10. Ibid.

11. Tango Lue.

12. "Chinese Owls Take Game from Olivers," Rafu Shimpo, May 9, 1929, p. 1.

13. "Chinese Meet Japanese for Oriental Grid Championship," Rafu Shimpo, February 22, 1931, p. 1.

14. Sport Editor, "In the Middle of Things," Rafu Shimpo, March 1, 1931, p. 5.

15. "Chinese Cagers Win from Hollycub Five," Rafu Shimpo, March 22, 1931, p. 5.

16. C. M., "Champion Lowa Five to Play in Fresno," Rafu Shimpo, April 30, 1931, p. 1.

17. "Los Angeles Park-Rec Department Honors George H. Tong," East-West, May 26, 1971, p. 1.

18. Ibid.

19. Personal correspondence, Mrs. George Tong, March, 1984.

20. Ibid.

21. Sherman Louie, "The Chinese Basketball Story," Los Angeles Chinatown 1981 Souvenir Book, p. 43.

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23. Louise H. Leong, "Thrus Wong Flies a Kite," Los Angeles Chinatown Souvenir Book (1984), p. 31.

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